

**Quechee Gorge Bridge Suicide Prevention Study  
Public Meeting  
Wednesday, November 16, 2016 6-8PM  
Hartford Town Hall, 171 Bridge Street, White River Junction, VT 05001**

The public meeting was for the purpose of providing an overview of the Quechee Gorge Suicide Prevention Study, related work currently happening at the Bridge, and to give the public the opportunity to ask questions and provide input to the process. Relevant plan documents will be available for review at the Hartford Town Office (171 Bridge Street, White River Junction) and online <http://vtrans.vermont.gov/planning/projects-programs>. The information received will be considered as the Agency prepares draft Quechee Gorge Bridge Suicide Prevention Study and final Legislative Report. Comments will be accepted until 12/16/16 and should be submitted via email to [Jackie.Cassino@vermont.gov](mailto:Jackie.Cassino@vermont.gov) or via mail to:

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Vermont Agency of Transportation  
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Meeting Notes:

**Transportation Bill specifics**

- Section 38 of the 2016 Transportation Bill – Quechee Gorge Bridge Safety Issues, tasks VTrans with two tasks.
  1. “...completing a project on or proximate to Bridge 61 on US Route 4 to install a structure providing information and resources, signs, or communication devices, or some combination of these, aimed at preventing suicides at the bridge.”
  2. To work with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, the Department of Health, the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Public Safety, local officials, local emergency personnel, the Hartford Area Chamber of Commerce, mental health practitioners, local business owners, and other interested stakeholders, the Agency of Transportation shall thoroughly review suicide prevention as well as pedestrian, first responder, and other safety measures that could be taken, and the merits of taking such measures, at the Quechee Gorge Bridge. Specifically- the report will identify-
    - Options for physical improvements to the bridge structure and surrounding area as well as non-infrastructure related safety improvement measures that can be taken in the area
    - Cost estimates and expected timeline for implementation measures
    - Economic, community and tourism concerns associated with the measure

## **Project Overview**

-Starting in May of 2016, VTrans reviewed testimony on this matter provided during the last legislative session, conducted our own literature review of national and international best practices as well as engaged national transportation professionals and research professionals on the subject matter.

-VTrans identified relevant case studies where other state DOTs or bridge authorities have tackled similar issues.

-VTrans began engaging local stakeholders and mental health professionals to begin working to addressing those two tasks- and held two local meetings to specifically discuss how to best address Task 1. The following organizations/individuals have been involved: Hartford municipal staff, police, fire & rescue; local Chamber of Commerce and business owners, the regional planning commission, Windsor County Partnership, the Vermont Department of Health- District Health Office, Vermont Suicide Coalition, Hartford Community Coalition, local high school guidance programs, Vermont Department of Mental Health, and Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center.

-Beginning in July- VTrans began providing regular updates on the work to local stakeholders engaged in this- approximately twice monthly

-Emergency call boxes and associated with signs depicting vetted messages of hope- are scheduled to be installed late November, 2016.

-In August, VTrans hired the transportation planning and engineering firm DuBois & King and the Vermont Suicide Prevention Center to assist with Task 2.

-Study will be completed in December of delivery to the Legislature in January. The Legislature will then determine the timeline for next steps.

## **Presentation by Lucy Gibson, DuBois & King**

-Presentation can be reviewed here: <http://vtrans.vermont.gov/planning/projects-programs>

## **Comments/Questions**

1. What is the working timeline
  - a. Study must be completed in December for delivery to the Legislature
  - b. The Legislature will determine the timeline for next steps
  - c. If a project were to move forward it would take time to program the project in the AOT Capital Program, go through the permitting process, and the project development process
2. Is there a ball park figure regarding the cost of the Alternatives
  - a. Consultants are working on getting those together. Can generally estimate that the vertical barriers would be the most expensive upfront- as the bridge sidewalk and railing would need to be rehabbed as well. The nets would be less expensive to install, but with a potential maintenance cycle dictating replacement every 5 years, the cost savings may be minor.
  - b. If sidewalks and street lighting would add a lot of money to the barrier options
  - c. Construction cost estimate, maintenance costs, timing of permitting, design, construction will all be available in the Legislative Report

- d. The netting looks like it will be much more cost effective due to the fact that it could be done without replacing the sidewalk
- 3. Does the net option require any changes to the current railing
  - a. No
- 4. Is the current bridge railing deficient
  - a. No but the current railing does not meet the new standards for a pedestrian and vehicle railing
  - b. If it were to be removed it would have to be replaced with an upgraded railing which would meet the new standard
  - c. The new standard would require a 4 bar galvanized steel rail
    - i. As a traffic rail it would be either 2'9" high or 3' high
    - ii. In this case the traffic barrier would be lower than the existing bridge rail
    - iii. There would then be a high outer railing on the bridge
  - d. Although the current barrier does not meet current standards it is not unsafe
  - e. If the nets were installed there would be no need for changing the pedestrian barrier
  - f. If the barrier method were used instead of the netting option then the barrier method would require that the sidewalks be redone and the interior traffic barrier would be required
- 5. Will bridge maintenance (Washing and Painting) be affected by the nets or vertical barriers
  - a. A bucket truck is typically used, could a bucket truck still be utilized? Yes
    - i. Several of the tall barriers would be removable so that the bucket truck could be used
    - ii. The netting would be retractable
- 6. How would the police department/rescue operations be notified if someone was in the net
  - a. Motion sensors could be installed on the nets that would trigger an alert
  - b. Hartford PD could also check the nets as a part of their regular patrol of the area
- 7. On the vertical barrier – why 6" not 8" between the vertical barriers
  - a. At the lower levels 6" are required as per federal and state standards, there would be a potential to then transition to a wider space higher up
- 8. Comment regarding the number of deaths, whether or not a barrier would be effective, and the expense of making such changes at the bridge. Other option to consider would be an observation tube under the bridge- which would get the pedestrians off the bridge and support tourism opportunities.
  - a. Studies have shown that barriers do prevent suicides
  - b. Adjacent bridges to bridges where barriers have been installed do not see rises in suicide incidents
  - c. Early 2000's planning study with a similar configuration with an observation area –was determined to be cost prohibitive
  - d. This is a historic structure and it would be incredibly difficult to permit that sort of alternation - as it would require alteration to the bridge arches
- 9. Comment regarding the cost of loss of life- cannot put a price tag on that
  - a. The Medical Examiner's office was only collecting data back to 2003- so this study is not considering the deaths before 2003
  - b. First responder risks should also be considered
    - i. Both physical recovery risks and mental health impacts
    - ii. Financial cost of rescue and recovery operations
- 10. What would the impact of the netting on wildlife be (related to the nearby VINS facility)
  - a. Unsure at this time

- b. This would be analyzed and addressed as part of the environmental review and permitting process in the next phase if the Agency is to go forward with construction
- 11. Question regarding what is the timeline for construction
  - a. Based on the Agency's standard bridge inspection criteria, this bridge is not currently on the Agency's programmed construction list – so it is not in our Capital Program at this time
  - b. Based on the last bridge inspection report, there are some deterioration and maintenance issues that will need to be addressed in the coming years- but nothing is in poor or failing condition at this time
- 12. What is the input from first responders regarding the two proposed options
  - a. Initially, concern was expressed regarding the net's impact of a rescue operations - according to the PD and Rescue staff- they are accepting of which ever method is chosen, so long as they have vertical access to the Gorge.
  - b. Cornell's nets are retractable to improve access for maintenance and emergency responders
- 13. The report should consider the costs of investment would be aromatized over a long period of time – relative to the costs per life lost
  - a. From a safety perspective this would easily be cost effective how those benefits are measured
  - b. There are also maintenance costs to be taken into account
- 14. Analysis and options appear thorough - comments from local business owner as follows
  - a. For those who do business or work at the gorge – the bridge is the destination
  - b. The Agency needs to address what they do for their business mission- which does not typically take economic impact into account- but the business community at the bridge is directly impacted by the day to day count of visitors
  - c. The wonder this natural area and the opportunity to experience it needs to be preserved
  - d. Let's move forward together
  - e. If the solution decreases the flow of people who want to come – that would be an issue
    - i. The impact of social media has a huge impact and is time sensitive
    - ii. How can we potentially increase the attraction of visitors!
  - f. If both of these solutions work then let's find a way to move forward with one of them, with the economic/tourism/visual impacts in mind
  - g. There may be other technological changes (light, sound, voice, recorded sensor driven devices) that could be around the corner- don't act hastily
- 15. Comment regarding the historic nature of the bridge- Historic Steel Arch Bridge – highest in the State of Vermont
- 16. Are the barrier and netting equally effective in suicide prevention
  - a. Yes- although neither are 100% effective.
- 17. Rescue Operations
  - a. Police Chief again indicated that either option would be workable for the fire/rescue community
  - b. The training materials used by the Ithaca Departments have been reviewed and could be implemented here
- 18. Would people climb out of the net and try to continue their pursuit
  - a. Interviews with survivors indicate that the majority of people who jump into the net have a wakeup call and realize that they regretted their impulse to jump

- b. No barrier is 100% effective and there are a few cases – although rare- noted where people then climbed over the nets. This is also true of the vertical barriers.
- 19. When would someone find the person in the net
  - a. Having sensors that would trigger a response is going to be critical
  - b. Having lighting sounds like it is also very important
    - i. About half of the events were at night-  $\frac{3}{4}$  total if consider early AM hours as well
    - ii. In Japan gorge bridges are now being lighted and are analyzing pre-lighting versus post lighting
      - 1. Initial indications are that the lighting is reducing the incidence of jumping
- 20. What amount of funding is going to be need to be spent on this bridge in the next several years
  - a. There are no structural deficiencies which would indicate that the bridge would be needing to be rehabbed or replaced any time in the near future
  - b. We inspect our bridges every two years
  - c. How many bridges are worked typically on each year (this may be an important piece of information to include in the report)- this varies but we can look into the ballpark estimate. Explained that the type of work done to address bridges falls into one of three categories:
    - i. Maintenance
    - ii. Rehab
    - iii. Reconstruction
- 21. What are the design considerations to be used in evaluating the options
  - a. Effectiveness in suicide prevention
  - b. Impact on the community
    - i. Barrier appearance
    - ii. Compatibility with viewing gorge
  - c. Impact on the bridge structure and load rating
  - d. Emergency response considerations
  - e. Maintenance requirements
  - f. Costs
- 22. Kip Miller – Gift Shop Owner – 36<sup>th</sup> season, owner since 1980 comments as follows
  - a. The inside rails of the bridge have been used on the bridge since at least 1980
  - b. His survey of business owners in the area of the bridge favors the netting solution
- 23. Gary Neale – Quechee Gorge Village owner comments as follows
  - a. The people who come look forward to an outdoor recreational adventure
    - i. Looking at the bridge from the side
    - ii. From the dam
    - iii. From the bridge
  - b. How does it look, how does it make you feel, what are you saying about it on social media
  - c. Even with netting, it could still be a wonderful experience for a relatively
- 24. PJ Skeehan – Visitor's Center/Hartford Chamber comments as follows
  - a. We don't want this known as a suicide bridge
  - b. Something needs to be done
  - c. Sending out initial emails folks think netting is likely more aesthetic
  - d. This is a big tourist attraction
  - e. The trails are also popular

- f. Each suicide is traumatic for the folks that work near the bridge – and of course the families
  - g. We need to look for a solution that prevents suicide and increases visitors
    - i. Spend more money on marketing to attract more visitors
- 25. Alison Clarkson comments as follows
  - a. Need to consider the the cost for rescue/retrievals as part of the evaluation criteria
  - b. Leo Pullar - Town Mgr response
    - i. Salaries of responders, likely overtime if it goes beyond one shift
    - ii. No nighttime responses but staff need to be on the bridge to secure the scene
    - iii. Aftercare for first responders
    - iv. Estimate of approximately \$20K per rescue (this should be included in the report)
  - c. Police Chief Kasten- should also consider the ongoing costs associated with the rescue operations- this is inclusive of
    - i. Police investigation costs
    - ii. Medical examiners costs
    - iii. Police social worker costs
    - iv. Specialized rescue equipment costs
    - v. Potential injury of rescue workers
- 26. Scott Farnsworth- Local high school principal/former Guidance Director of the HS – Hartford Community Coalition member comments as follows
  - a. When Hartford becomes a community that care, cost doesn't really matter
  - b. When there is an OD, we care and come together to figure out a solution
  - c. We have a structure that was created by mankind – what do we do
  - d. I appreciate the netting, this could be a win-win
  - e. Let's continue to have these conversations and work together
- 27. Alison Clarkson comments as follows
  - a. The AOT is putting together the budget right now – they can make it a priority – they have the opportunity to make it a priority
  - b. The Legislators can also make it a priority as they work on the T Bill
- 28. Regie Cooper comments as follows
  - a. The town is paying for the cost of the rescues
  - b. The statistics indicate that these are folks from all over the state and out of states
  - c. The bridge is becoming known as a suicide hot spot and people are coming
- 29. Police Chief Kasten comments as follows
  - a. Could we potentially get grants for street scape enhancements- yes
  - b. Alison indicated that the historic nature of the bridge could attract funding – like through Paul Bruhn
  - c. Minor damage accidents are not all being recorded (occurrences on the bridge) – there are likely a high number of these
  - d. Pedestrian and vehicle safety which could be enhanced by improvements to these facilities on the bridge
- 30. Current status of Pedestrian Crossing comments
  - a. By the Visitors Center there is a lighting system which is not being as well recognized as it could be
  - b. The speed flasher signs are somewhat helpful in slowing folks down
  - c. Traffic moves very quickly through this area
  - d. There is driver distraction on the bridge due to observing the views

**Recap of Next Steps and Meeting Adjourns 7:48PM**